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Dorchester United Neighborhood Associations

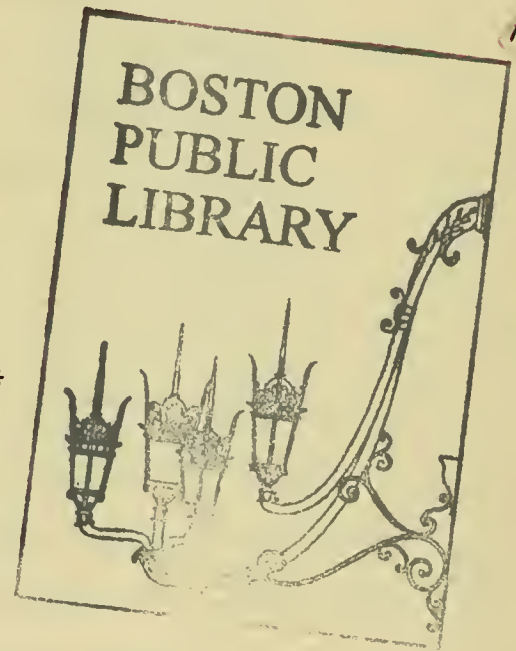
AN

IMPROVEMENT AREA PROGRAM
FOR
DORCHESTER

(BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS)

"coming together is a beginning:
keeping together is progress:
working together is success" *

NOVEMBER, 1961



(* Citizens' Civic Association, Inc. Fort Wayne, Indiana)

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IMPROVEMENT AREA PROGRAM

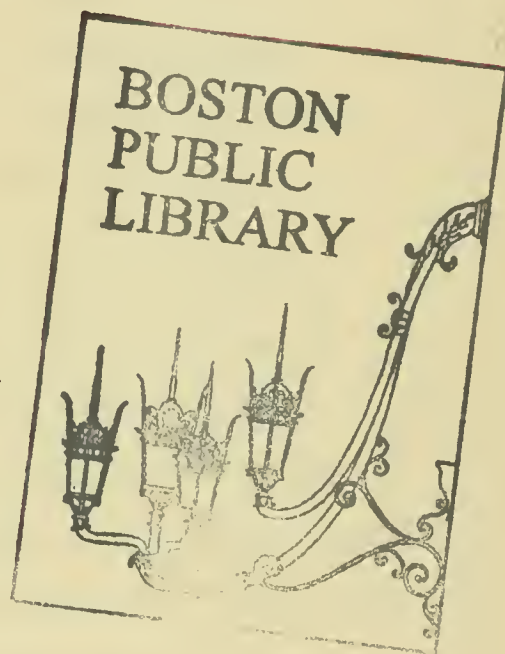
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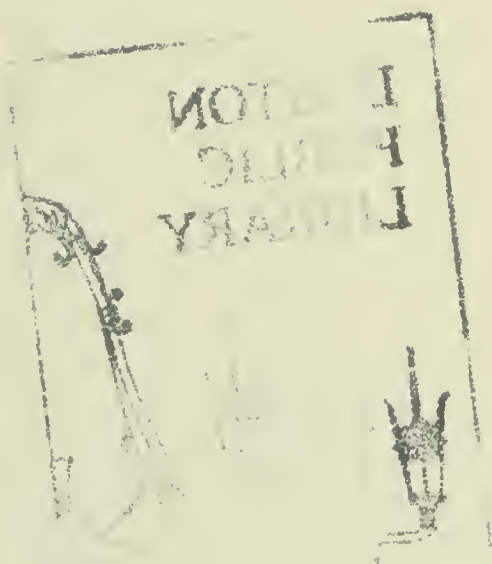
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PREAMBLE

Dorchester is one of the oldest sections of the City of Boston. It is proud of its past history and it looks with hope to the future. It is the City's largest residential community, serving the needs of over 190,000 people or 25 percent of Boston's total population.

On the south, Dorchester has Milton and Quincy as neighbors. Commuters from the whole South Shore come through Dorchester on their way to work down-town. To the east, Dorchester has a potentially magnificent water front which should be developed into a recreational resource. To the west, Dorchester has Franklin Park, Boston State Hospital and the cemetery complex which act as a green belt. It is, however, to the north and northwest that the seeds of destruction lie. It is from this direction that blight, zoning violations, non-compatible land uses and the pressure of factors which lead to and cause physical deterioration and social disorganization are coming.

These districts between Dorchester and the down-town area now are receiving the deserved attention of the City of Boston through the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Urban renewal is beneficial to the central areas of the City, in fact, it will be beneficial to the entire City. But how beneficial will the urban renewal program be if it magnifies problems and deterioration in Dorchester because of lack of attention? One can foresee two alternatives for Dorchester--either it will be the slum of 1970 or it can be the strong residential area that it has been in the past.

Dorchester's future hangs on a very thin margin and the decision to be reached is not simple. Dorchester has faith in Boston. Does Boston have faith in Dorchester? Can Boston marshal its resources and provide an Improvement Area program for Dorchester which, with the use of code enforcement, efficient City services, planning, community improvements, private improvements, and citizen

participation, will hold the line in Dorchester against the seeds of its destruction? The strength of Boston lies not only in renewing the central part of the city but in improving and holding the line in the surrounding areas.

Dorchester is solidly behind urban renewal for Boston and behind those who proposed the program. The Improvement Area concept is one that the Mayor, Honorable John F. Collins; the City Council and the Development Administrator, Edward J. Logue, have proposed in their wisdom. (See the City Record, issue of September 24, 1960, entitled "The 90 Million Dollar Development Program for Boston") Even now studies are in process for the organization of code enforcement activities. Dorchester is willing to work in cooperation with the City so that the hundreds of dollars spent today will eliminate the need to spend millions tomorrow.

For the purposes of the proposed improvement program for Dorchester, the area to be considered is bounded by Columbia Road, Boston Street, the Southeast Expressway, Dorchester Bay, the Neponset River, Cummings Highway, Harvard Street, Walk Hill Street, American Legion Highway, Blue Hill Avenue to Columbia Road. This area faces many problems, but in a more positive sense it has many assets.

To build on its tradition of strength and its vision of a better community is the objective of the ten individual neighborhood associations and their coordinating organization, the Dorchester United Neighborhood Associations (DUNA), representing the entire area.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Dorchester is not only the largest district in the City, it has also long been known as the bedroom of Boston. An approximate breakdown of land use will show

80% residential (including churches, schools, libraries, playgrounds, and other community facilities), 10% commercial, 8% light industrial and 2% heavy industrial. It is the present and future condition of the area as a predominantly residential community that gives us cause for concern.

To further describe the area of Dorchester, we point to its topographical and landscape features. We note with pride its many hills, its trees and shrubs and gardens, and its proximity to the water front and the beaches (Savin Hill, Malibu and Tenean).

Because of the hills, the streets follow no symmetrical pattern but, for the most part, evolved from local preference before the era of automobile transportation and, therefore, without consideration for modern traffic conditions. There are several main through streets from which a great many short side streets branch off in a somewhat haphazard fashion. This presents a major problem, but, if traffic flow and parking were properly regulated the street pattern will continue to be highly desirable for a residential area.

In the course of three centuries the earlier large estates and farms have been subdivided and built up with housing to meet the demands of an expanding urban population, until Dorchester has become the residential area we live in today consisting of single, two-family, and three-decker houses. The determination of housing types followed no fixed pattern but has been the result of successive building trends. There are areas in which mixed types will be found and other areas with one predominant type - either single or two-family or three-decker construction.

BASIC SOCIAL FACTORS

The series of developments that produced the now existing residences began during the latter part of the 19th century. The search for an uncrowded suburban

environment brought many middle class Protestant families from Roxbury and the South End. Then, about the turn of the century the well-to-do Irish Catholic families started to move out from South Boston. Up to this time the house lots were of relatively generous size but the remaining open land was subdivided into smaller lots during the first three decades of the 20th century, when most of the two-family and three-decker houses were built. During this period many Jewish families looking for better living conditions moved from Chelsea and Boston's more crowded districts to Dorchester, settling in the northwest district and thence south into the Mattapan section. By the mid-1930's Dorchester had one of the highest proportions of Jewish population of any metropolitan area in the United States.

The most recent trend occurred during the 1940's when many of the older and larger single family houses were converted, without regard for code standards, into two and three family residences. These apartments were occupied by families of civilian defense workers and servicemen, people of a lower economic status brought into the city by war-time conditions.

Over the past twenty year period the demolition of older sections of Boston and the in-migration of new ethnic groups from other parts of the country have created an increasing demand for housing. At the same time, the moving away of higher income younger families has created in Dorchester a vacuum that is being filled by families moving outward from the central City. The rapid rate of population change has created a new situation that has not yet been stabilized. In part, a problem exists because the demand for housing has resulted in the exploitation of new residents and it has been made more serious by the negligent practices of some absentee landlords and the scare tactics of some real estate agents,*

The end result is an increasing area of overcrowded and deteriorating houses and

* for example, using the role of real estate to a new ethnic group to cause neighboring owners to sell their property at a reduced price and then reselling the property at excessive prices. The lack of responsibility on the part of tenants is another problem.

the disorganization of neighborhoods.

In the North Dorchester area and adjacent districts there are many new families from the southern states and older residents are finding an increase of people from other ethnic backgrounds among their new neighbors. There is not the positive group identification among the Negroes that is usually found in other ethnic groups. Also, there is a very wide cultural range among the Negroes which is not often understood or appreciated by the white peoples. The tendency is to lump all non-whites together as lower class, which prompts whites to move out if a non-white family locates on their street. With the accelerated rate of population change resulting from the urban renewal program in the core City, it is essential to develop a set of conditions that will allow all groups to become integrated into the community. This can be accomplished only through efforts to increase understanding and to promote the neighborhood's standards. In this effort the Dorchester Inter-Agency Council, representing the health and social welfare resources and one of DUNA's cooperating organizations, is giving leadership.

Other social conditions call for attention. Presently there is a definite lack of supervised recreational activities for all age levels. A well organized program with proper facilities and qualified leadership would serve to reduce the incidence of juvenile delinquency and to provide outlets for the older generation. In these and other ways neighborhoods can be strengthened and community spirit developed.

GOALS OF IMPROVEMENT AREA PROGRAM

Dorchester submits an Improvement Area program, to be implemented through City-citizen cooperation, with the following goals:

1. to eliminate the cause and effect of blight;

2. to provide the incentive for new private investment;
3. to secure the proper planning, coordination and supervision of municipal action and services in order to reduce operating costs; and
4. to produce an organized means by which citizens can work effectively in cooperation with the City.

The achievement of these goals will result in the stabilization of the existing tax base.

The program also will provide the means by which the human conditions and the well-being of the people of Dorchester can be improved and stimulated. Thus will the City prove that it cares about Dorchester so that Dorchester's faith in itself can be increased and maintained.

AN IMPROVEMENT AREA PROGRAM FOR DORCHESTER

The following program is designed to make the maximum use of Dorchester's natural assets and to remove the detrimental influences that create blight. Strong consideration must be given to the development of the water front, the beautification of parks and recreational sites, and the preservation of areas of historical significance. Dorchester's existing residential character, with its scenic hills and interesting street pattern, should be developed to its greatest potential. Its proximity to down-town Boston and the accessibility of rapid transit insures its continuing priority as a residential area.

But Dorchester is starting to decay. Clear evidence of this can be observed on a walking tour of any neighborhood. One primary cause of the deterioration has been the changes in modes of transportation, with the subsequent changes in shopping habits that have resulted in vacant stores. Here is found the first evidence

of blight. This decay has been accelerated by the influx of undesirable commercial and industrial development, lack of control over absentee landlords and traffic congestion in the areas where business and residential land use conflict.

In order to arrest the growth of blight and decay some, or all, of the following steps must be taken.

Code Enforcement:

A systematized procedure for the enforcement of health, building, fire, police and zoning codes and ordinances is necessary. The program should possibly follow the recommendations of the current study by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau. Code enforcement should be both immediate and continuous.

Enabling legislation requiring registration of absentee landlords was adopted by the City Council with the strong support of Dorchester citizens. Dorchester now expects the intent of this law to be carried out. Dorchester supports the Mayor's program for a clean Boston and litter laws should be enforced with increased fines as part of this program.

Experience across the country has demonstrated the fact that effective code enforcement requires the establishment of a Housing Court. Such a recommendation has been made by the State Legislature ("Massachusetts Needs in Urban and Industrial Renewal" - House Document 3373, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1960).

Private Improvements:

Code enforcement will, of necessity, result in private improvement of property. Such a program will receive public support only if it is accomplished by cooperative efforts on the part of the City.

Technical assistance in designing, financing, constructing and self-helping to cut

costs are essential. A demonstration of improvement on a typical Dorchester residential structure should be undertaken with appropriate publicity and exhibits. A hand-book outlining plans, costs and suggested improvements of various residential housing types should be prepared and made available to residents.

Photographs should be taken of the Mayor presenting a certificate of merit to residents who have completed the improvement of their property and appropriate publicity given thereto.

The City, with citizen groups cooperating, should continue to support efforts to correct prevailing insurance problems. The City should make public, in writing, its standardized assessment policy to inform property owners of their rights under this new City policy. The City should also devise special incentives for home improvements by means of new and more flexible tax policies.

City Services:

The private citizen is expected to make a contribution to the City by the proper maintenance of his property. The City, in turn, should encourage this contribution by continued improvement of its services. Standards of City Services should be published and made available to the general public. Any and all complaints should be handled with due haste and dispatch, without any delay, and formally answered in writing to report the disposition of complaints. There should be a method of automatic follow-up notices until the complaint is rectified. Particular attention should be given to City Streets with reference to cleaning, traffic control, traffic circulation and parking.

Community Improvements:

Considering the City's extensive financial commitment for major capital improvements in the urban renewal areas, Dorchester approves the current long range study

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of schools and suggests that similar studies be conducted on a city-wide basis for other major facilities.

Dorchester does not expect to be neglected over the life of the urban renewal program. To demonstrate the City's faith in Dorchester, minor capital improvements are necessary immediately in conjunction with the Improvement Area program. Such improvements are: new playgrounds or tot-lots where needed, equipment for existing playgrounds, landscaping for neighborhood beautification, off-street parking areas and improved street lighting. Special attention should be given to developing Dorchester's "window on the world" - its water front - as a recreational resource.

Planning:

To make the program of action effective it must be based on an evaluation of existing conditions and planned in terms of strategy, priority and methods to accomplish Dorchester's goals.

Citizens have been planning in Dorchester for the last year and a half. The community will welcome professional staff assistance on a full-time basis.

A program of identification and enhancement of Dorchester's historic sites should be developed. A published plan on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis of future development will encourage investment by businessmen and residents without fear of financial loss. From our past experience, neighborhood planning, to be effective, must take place within the local area.

Citizen Participation:

Organized citizen participation is essential to all phases of the Improvement Area program. The Dorchester United Neighborhood Associations has in the past worked cooperatively with the City and intends to continue this practice in the future.

This cooperative relationship can become the basis of a working partnership in a formal Improvement Area program. Dorchester citizens have demonstrated their willingness to accept responsibility by the following examples:

1. volunteer supervision of playgrounds;
2. clean-up drives and clearing vacant City properties;
3. accompanying code inspectors in the area;
4. obtaining cooperation of owners and tenants in the care of private and public property;
5. conducting field surveys for land use, building condition, community facilities, etc;
6. planned informational programs for the neighborhood;
7. handling complaints for individual residents;
8. sponsoring and supporting legislation affecting the community;
9. attending public hearings on matters of importance to the area;
10. commendation of citizens and public officials for jobs well done.

In a formal Improvement Area Program citizens could also organize a central clearing house for resident complaints, compile lists of reliable contractors and perform other services. Residents would accept the responsibility for preparing general information interpreting the Improvement Area program to the community.

Dorchester as a vital, interested and aggressive community asks that it be the first Improvement Area and that its proposed program be accepted. In this way Dorchester will move ahead with Boston rather than fall behind in the future.

FINANCING THE INITIAL PROGRAM

The program will require the allocation of City funds for Dorchester, making provision for code enforcement and capital improvements as well as securing a

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local administrative and planning staff to give the direct service that will facilitate improvement of private property and enable the community to assume its responsibility for citizen participation.

Consideration has been given to the City's budget expenditures and, in recommending the Improvement Area program, Dorchester stands firmly on the conviction that the tax rate in Boston must not be increased. Actually, the program represents the means of appropriating municipal funds in a way that will support the Administration's efforts toward more efficient operation of the City government.

A method of financing the program could be found in designating funds within existing departmental budgets for use in Dorchester. Also, it would be possible to supplement considerably the City's share of the administrative costs by developing the program as a demonstration project in conservation under the provisions of Section 314, Housing Act of 1954.

Dorchester has set its goals within the limits of what the City can reasonably provide in the immediate future, in return for which the City can confidently expect that further stabilization of its tax base will result from an improvement program in Dorchester.

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An improvement area program
for Dorchester.

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